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LAOS: Lao Communist leader Souphanouvong has ruled out any personal peace negotiations with Prime Minister Souvanna Phouma for the time being.

In an official interview late last week in Sam Neua, Phoumi Vongvichit, the Lao Communist "special adviser" to the peace talks in Vientiane, said that Souphanouvong had declined Souvanna's recent invitation to meet in the royal capital at Luang Prabang because "the present situation" does not warrant such a meeting. According to Phoumi, Souphanouvong specifically blamed Vientiane for the lack of progress in the talks to date, and accused the government of stepping up the fighting in north and south Laos. Phoumi indicated, however, that if Souvanna should adopt "a positive attitude to make negotiations progress favorably" then Souphanouvong might be willing to meet with him.

This rebuff probably will be taken in stride by Souvanna, who remains relatively optimistic about the prospects for peace. Last week, he reportedly said that he is firmly convinced that a settlement in Laos is at hand. At the same time, however, he emphasized that such a settlement could not be reached until Washington and Hanoi have achieved definite agreement on Vietnam.

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HUNGARY-USSR: Brezhnev's visit to Budapest, beginning today, will produce public expressions of Soviet-Hungarian solidarity, but is not expected to solve trade differences or entirely dispel Soviet apprehension about Hungary's economic reforms.

Last March Premier Fock publicly complained of Soviet unwillingness to fulfill Hungary's long-range raw material needs, but both sides have subsequently avoided public airing of their bargaining positions. Brezhnev will receive assurances that the Hungarian economic reforms are not eroding party control. Indeed, closer regulation of investments and trade with the West has already helped to provide reassurance. The Hungarians will remain alert to Soviet sensitivities and be willing to make minor adjustments.

A recent Hungarian plenum fully endorsed Kadar's programs, and this leaves him in a strong position to handle any tough questions posed by Brezhnev. The visit probably will end in a general endorsement of the Budapest regime and a statement of complete accord on foreign policy matters. [REDACTED]

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VENEZUELA: Widespread outbreaks of student violence during the past two weeks appear to have been stirred up by leftist political groups.

The violence that has swirled through most major Venezuelan cities since 9 November dispelled the illusion of calm in student ranks that had prevailed since schools reopened this autumn. The most serious outbreak occurred on 20 November in Caracas, when student demonstrators burned vehicles, stoned businesses, and cut off vehicular traffic in some sections of the city, forcing police units to counter with widespread use of tear gas.

Although the intensity and causes of the disturbances varied, a common theme throughout has been student demands for the release of "political prisoners." This issue has been blown into a major campaign issue by independent presidential candidate Jose Vicente Rangel and his followers in the Marxist Movement for Socialism, a new party which is attracting widespread support among Venezuelan leftists. The government has steadfastly refused to accede to the student demand, claiming that it is an attempt to accord respectability to common law breakers.

Students have resorted to violence in Venezuela in the past in their efforts to direct attention to economic and social problems which they believe the establishment parties are incapable of resolving. Although it is too early to determine if the level of student dissidence will equal or surpass previous excesses, the latest outbreak demonstrates the susceptibility of this large volatile segment of the population to political manipulation by extreme leftist political groups. Further efforts to manipulate student discontent can be expected as the general elections scheduled in December 1973 draw closer.

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NOTES

CUBA: The reorganization of the top level of the government last week appears to be administrative rather than political. The realignment of ministers and previously autonomous agencies under eight vice prime ministers of the newly created Executive Committee of the Council of Ministers is merely formal recognition of a restructuring process that Fidel Castro set in motion in 1970 after several political and economic setbacks. The new vice prime ministers for the most part have essentially the same duties that they have been discharging for some time. Although ambiguous initial announcements gave the impression that Raul Castro might have been reduced in power, it now appears that his position as number two man remains unchanged. [REDACTED]

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NEW ZEALAND: The new Labor government may make some foreign policy changes. If the government abides by its election manifesto, it will probably bring home the small New Zealand training contingent in South Vietnam, initiate steps to establish diplomatic relations with Peking, and work toward eventual withdrawal of troops stationed in Singapore and Malaysia under the five-power defense arrangement with Australia and the United Kingdom. No significant changes in relations with the US are expected. The new prime minister, Norman Kirk, has stated his commitment to the ANZUS treaty with Australia and the US, and has made it clear that he views the US as the guarantor of New Zealand's security. [REDACTED]

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